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WHEN DEVELOPMENT GOES WRONG: THE DRAINAGE OF THE MARSHES OF SOUTHERN IRAQ IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Rahmi Elahjji

Mentors: Nancy Reynolds and Timothy Parsons

Until the early 1990s, the marshes of southern Iraq were the largest continuous system of wetlands in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein's regime undertook a massive development project to drain the marshes by diverting water flow from the Tigris and Euphrates river systems. The reason behind this, as professed by the Iraqi state, was to repurpose this marshland for agricultural improvement. This project, however, came at a massive ecological and human cost, disrupting one of the region's major ecosystems and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. While development might have been the professed goal of the venture, compelling evidence indicates that Saddam's regime intended to punish the communities of these marshes as retribution for their perceived support of the 1991 uprisings in Iraq. This thesis interrogates this drainage scheme in the context of the wider, global history of the development project. Employing a variety of sources including ethnographies, environmental studies, and both local and international media coverage of the event, this thesis argues that historical systems of knowledge production and developmental interventions within the marshes made the framing of the drainage scheme as a development project possible. Further, this thesis contends that these two historical strands of knowledge production and developmental intervention allowed the state to pursue a policy of environmental violence, defined as a type of violence committed against both a defined environmental landscape, like the marshes of southern Iraq, and against the human societies that live there, like the Marsh Arab communities. In the case of this marsh drainage project, the Iraqi state employed environmental violence as both an instrument of state repression and as retribution for insubordination by certain political and ethnic minorities.